

Vocal Arts Ensemble Bio  
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# The United States Army Field Band

The Musical Ambassadors of the Army  
*Washington, DC*

## THE VOCAL ARTS ENSEMBLE

**The Vocal Arts Ensemble** is derived from the Soldiers' Chorus of The United States Army Field Band. Its widely-varied *a cappella* repertoire ranges from Gregorian chant to present day choral classics. Each of its members is a distinguished soloist, wholly dedicated to the choral art, bringing a wealth of talent, experience, and education to the ensemble. Since its establishment in 1992, the Vocal Arts Ensemble has performed on college campuses nationwide, playing a vital role in the Field Band's educational outreach program.

**Master Sergeant Janet Hjelmgren, soprano**, a native of Lake Elmo, Minnesota, attended the College of St. Catherine, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Vocal Performance and Art. While subsequently living abroad in Florence, Italy, she was able to further both disciplines. She continued her voice studies at the University of Maryland with Linda Mabbs and Louise Urban, and coaching with Robert McCoy, and currently studies with Thomas Houser. Since joining the Soldiers' Chorus in 1985, MSG Hjelmgren has been a regularly featured soloist with the Field Band in performances throughout the United States, Europe, and Asia. In 1997, MSG Hjelmgren earned a Master of Education in Guidance and Counseling from Bowie State University, where she combined her skills as a performing artist and counselor to study the effects of performance anxiety in student singers. Her findings form the basis for her supplemental duties as a Soldiers' Chorus voice clinician. MSG Hjelmgren is a founding member of the Vocal Arts Ensemble.

**Staff Sergeant Dawn Kaspro, soprano**, received a Bachelor of Arts from St. Mary's College of Maryland in 1998 and a Master of Music from Manhattan School of Music in 2001. A Maryland native, she has performed roles locally with InterAct Theater Company and in New York City at the Manhattan School of Music; most recently, she played Lucia in Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia* under the baton of Maestro Julius Rudel. She has also performed as featured soloist with the Master Chorale of Washington. SSG Kaspro currently studies with Maitland Peters and Ruth Drucker.

**Sergeant First Class Joan Mercer, mezzo-soprano**, is a 1984 Bachelor of Music Education graduate of South Dakota State University. Her experience at SDSU as a voice and percussion student prepared her well for a widely-varied military music career. From 1985–1990, she taught percussion at the U.S. Armed Forces School of Music in Norfolk, Virginia. Subsequent assignments included duty as vocalist and percussionist with Army bands in South Korea and Atlanta, Georgia. While stationed at Fort McPherson, Georgia, SFC Mercer was a member of the Robert Shaw Chorale of the Atlanta Symphony Chorus. She joined the Soldiers' Chorus in 1996 and presently serves as the alto section leader. She continued her studies at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee, and is currently studying voice with Mary Ruzicka.

**Staff Sergeant Samantha Hammer, mezzo-soprano**, was born in Trenton, New Jersey, and obtained her Bachelor of Music in Education from Trenton State College. She taught choral music for several years at the New Jersey Governor's School for the Arts and North Hunterdon High School. She continued her studies at Illinois State University, where she received her Master of Music in Choral Conducting. While there, she had the opportunity to conduct all of the choral ensembles, and to organize curriculum and teach music education classes to elementary education majors. Since joining The United States Army Field Band in 1998, she has been a featured soloist on national tours. SSG Hammer currently studies with Mary Ruzicka.

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**Staff Sergeant Erica Russo, mezzo-soprano**, received dual Bachelor of Arts degrees in Music and Russian from Florida State University in 1994, where she sang in ensembles directed by André Thomas and Rodney Eichenberger. In 1997, she earned a Master of Arts in Musicology from Ohio State University while simultaneously studying conducting with Hilary Apfelstadt and James Gallagher. She has performed with the Columbus Symphony Chorus and with the Columbus-based Bel Canto Singers, and has frequently annotated programs for a wide variety of concerts and performing groups. Prior to joining the Soldiers' Chorus, SSG Russo taught middle and upper school music at Columbus School for Girls. She currently studies voice with Mary Ruzicka.

**Master Sergeant Douglas Cox, tenor and Director of the Vocal Arts Ensemble**, also serves as Assistant Director of the Soldiers' Chorus. Since joining the Field Band in 1983, he has been a frequent soloist on national tours. As a conductor, he has prepared the Soldiers' Chorus for appearances with several renowned orchestras, including the Boston Pops Orchestra, the Cincinnati Pops Orchestra, and the Detroit and Richmond symphonies. MSG Cox is a cum laude graduate of Wichita State University, where he earned a Bachelor of Music Education in 1977 and a Master of Music Education in 1979. As a graduate assistant at WSU, MSG Cox maintained an extensive applied voice studio and conducted the select WSU Chamber Singers. He has continued his conducting studies with Don Neuen, Paul Salamunovich, and Jon Washburn. Presently he is a voice student of Thomas Houser. MSG Cox is a founding member of the Vocal Arts Ensemble.

**Master Sergeant Daniel Hopkins, tenor**, hails from McLean, New York. As a Voice Performance major at the Crane School of Music in Potsdam, New York, he studied with Richard Griffith and George Foure, and performed in opera with director Thomas Holliday. More recently, he has studied with William Ray at the Peabody Conservatory and with Thomas Houser. MSG Hopkins is an active concert soloist and recitalist. Since joining the Soldiers' Chorus in 1982, he has performed as a featured soloist with the Concert Band on several national tours. MSG Hopkins is a founding member of the Vocal Arts Ensemble.

**Master Sergeant William Gabbard, tenor**, calls Pago Pago, American Samoa, home. He graduated cum laude from Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, where he was a double major in Vocal Performance and American History. He received his Master of Music in Vocal Performance and Pedagogy from the University of Iowa. He has been a voice student of John Van Cura since 1981. Prior to joining the Army in 1987, MSG Gabbard served on the voice faculty of the University of Nebraska-Omaha. While there, he performed as an oratorio soloist throughout the Midwest and South, and sang roles in regional opera productions. MSG Gabbard currently serves as vocal clinician for the Soldiers' Chorus, member of the Soundoff! barbershop quartet, Concert Band Narrator, Drum Major, and Unit Historian/Archivist. MSG Gabbard is a founding member of the Vocal Arts Ensemble.

**Master Sergeant Jeffrey Woods, bass**, is a native of Midland, Texas, and holds a Bachelor of Music Education from Angelo State University in San Angelo, Texas. Prior to joining the Soldiers' Chorus of The United States Army Field Band in 1988, MSG Woods taught vocal music in public schools in Texas. His duties with the Soldiers' Chorus include singing with the Vocal Arts Ensemble and the barbershop quartet, Soundoff! He also serves as Narrator for the Soldiers' Chorus and Stage Manager for the Concert Band and Soldiers' Chorus.

**Staff Sergeant Paul An, bass**, attended Rutgers University, where he was active in collegiate choral music including the Men's Glee Club and the Kirkpatrick Choir. He also sang in six different productions with the Opera Festival of New Jersey. SSG An studied and sang the role of Potts in a workshop premiere of Michael Ching's work-in-progress opera *The Lewis and Clark Expedition*. He studied piano with Aija Kim Cho and voice with Brian McIntosh and Ruth Drucker. He is currently studying voice performance with Steven Rainbolt at the Peabody Conservatory.